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ABSTRACT

Speakers' ages and intentions were examined as influences on children's evaluations of orally presented messages. A total of 112 third-grade children listened to one of four speakers, two women and two 9-year-old girls, presenting the same essays on videotape. Half of the children assigned to each of the four speakers were told that the speaker was trying to inform them about some topics; the other half were told that the speaker was trying to trick them. Children were asked for their evaluative responses to the essays, some of which contained internally inconsistent statements. Analyses indicated that children reported more inconsistencies with speakers described as deceptive than with speakers described as honest. Children reported more inconsistencies with adult speakers than with child speakers, although this difference was not statistically significant. Children's critical comments about the essays and speakers' presentations were also examined. The implications of social processes for children's comprehension monitoring are discussed. (Author/RH)

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Are You Trying to Trick Me? Some Social Influences on Children's Responses to Problematic Messages

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ABSTRACT

Speakers' ages and intentions were examined as influences on children's evaluations of orally presented messages. One hundred and twelve third-grade children listened to one of four speakers (two women and two nine-year-old girls) presenting the same essays on videotape. Half of the children assigned to each of the four speakers were informed that the speaker was trying to inform them about some topics; the other half were informed that the speaker was trying to trick them. Children were asked for their evaluative responses to the essays, some of which contained internally inconsistent statements. Analyses indicated that children reported more inconsistencies with speakers described as deceptive than with speakers described as honest. Children reported more inconsistencies with adult speakers than with child speakers, although this difference was not statistically significant. Children's critical comments about the essays and speakers' presentations were also examined. The implications of social processes for children's comprehension monitoring are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Young children often behave inadequately as listeners--they frequently fail to acknowledge the existence of glaring ambiguities and inconsistencies in others' messages. We now have considerable information about the cognitive deficits that affect children's performance on comprehension-monitoring tasks. Nonetheless, we still know little about the effects of social factors. The present study helps to fill this research gap by examining the effects of two social variables on children's report of inconsistencies: the intention and age of speakers.

Children's perceptions of speakers' intentions exert a strong effect on their scrutiny of messages (Jackson, 1981; Speer, 1984). From an early age, children expect that their conversational partners are cooperative (Shatz, 1978). With speakers they perceive in this manner, children may listen in an active but uncritical fashion, making "repairs" for faulty utterances (Ackerman, 1986; Baker, 1984). However, sometime between 6 and 9 years, children come to realize that speakers are not always sincere (Demorest, Meyer, Phelps, Gardner, & Winner, 1984). On occasions when they perceive speakers to be deceptive, then, children may tend to search actively for errors and not repair violations. The first purpose of this study was to extend work on speaker cooperativeness to a task in which children were confronted with internally inconsistent statements.

In addition to responding to problematic messages according to perceptions of speaker cooperativeness, children may also moderate their evaluation of messages according to salient speaker characteristics, such as age. Research findings to date suggest that speaker age significantly affects children's listening behavior, although the pattern of results is not yet fully clear. In general, children tend to treat adults as capable and credible, and do not question the truth of their statements. For example, children appear to trust an adult more than a child when the two sources contradict one another (Ackerman, 1983). However, this finding does not extend to self-contradictory statements made by adult and child speakers: McDevitt (1986) found that second- and fourth-grade children reported more contradictions with videotaped adult speakers than with child speakers. The second purpose of the study was to provide additional data on whether children report more inconsistencies with adult or child speakers.

The final purpose of the study was to examine the joint effects of speaker intention and age. Although children view adults as unlikely to make mistakes, they also think that older speakers have a greater power to conceal and deceive (Russell, 1984); with such a belief, they might be especially critical of the problematic statements of adults when they believe the adults are trying to deceive them.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of 112 third-grade children; there were an equal number of boys and girls. Children were recruited from three schools in a rural public school district in Colorado.

Procedures

Children listened to videotaped presentations of 1 of 4 speakers saying essays. All speakers were female; 2 were adults and 2 were 9-year-old girls (the approximate age of the child subjects). An equal number of girls and boys were assigned to each of the 4 speakers. Similarly, an equal number of girls and boys within the 4 speaker groups were assigned to the two conditions, "honest" and "deceptive."

At the beginning of the task, the interviewer informed all of the children that they would be listening to 10 essays on videotape and they would be asked some questions afterwards. Children in the "honest" condition were additionally told that the speaker wanted to inform them about some topics. Children in the "deceptive" condition were told that the speaker wanted to fool or trick them. The interviewer encouraged all children to listen carefully to the essays.

Each child listened to 5 experimental essays, which contained 2 inconsistent, or contradictory, statements, and 5 control essays, which were internally consistent. Each of the 4 speakers read the same essays in a pre-selected random order. Each essay was played twice. Children were asked what they thought of the essay, whether they understood it, and whether they found any problems in it. For each of the experimental essays, children were considered to have detected the inconsistency if they reported the problem and clearly described it. A variable was computed of the total number of experimental essays in which children reported the presence of an inconsistency. In addition, variables were computed of the number of essays, experimental and control, to which children responded with a critical comment, and of the types of criticisms they offered.

RESULTS

Children's Detection of Inconsistencies

A completely randomized design with three factors was employed: intention of speaker (deceptive, honest), gender of child, and speaker (one of two adults or one of two children) (Table 1). Children reported signficantly more inconsistencies with deceptive speakers than with honest speakers ($F(1,96) = 10.01$, $p < .005$). The speaker effect was not significant, although when the 2 representatives of the speaker-age groups were combined, the age-of-speaker effect was marginally significant ($t(110) = 1.77$, $p < .08$), thus providing some support for McDevitt's finding of a greater detection rate with adult speakers. Boys and girls did not differ in their detection rates and the interactions between speaker and intention and between gender of child, speaker, and intention were not significant. However, there was a significant interaction between child gender and speaker intention ($F(1,96) = 4.08$, $p < .05$). When listening to honest speakers, girls reported over twice as many inconsistencies as did boys. In the deceptive condition, the pattern was reversed: boys reported more inconsistencies than did girls.

Because there tended to be a floor effect with the detection score, children's responses were examined with non-parametric statistics (Table 2). Children who had detected at least one of the inconsistencies were compared with children who detected none. These results confirmed the findings from the analysis of variance.

Children's Negative Evaluations of Essays

Children's evaluative comments provided valuable supplementary information about children's listening responses. A repeated-measures analysis of variance was computed on the number of essays to which children responded with a negative evaluation. Intention of speaker (deceptive, honest), child gender, and age of speaker (adult, child) were included as between-subject factors. The within-subject effect was type of essay (experimental, control). When responses to experimental and control essays were combined, children provided more critical comments to deceptive speakers than to honest speakers ($F(1,104) = 12.63$, $p < .005$). Children also evaluated essays negatively more often when listening to experimental essays than when listening to control essays ($F(1,104) = 105.01$, $p < .001$). In addition, there was a significant interaction between essay type and speaker intention ($F(1,104) = 4.67$, $p < .05$). Children did not vary their frequency of critical comments much according to speaker intention for control essays, but they did do so for experimental essays.

Children's Critical Comments

One possible origin of children's greater detection rates with adult speakers is that the child subjects were distracted by the child speakers' presentations, or that they perceived the child speakers to speak in a less fluent fashion. In fact, children did complain about the style of the presentation and difficulty in deciphering the sounds of words more with child speakers (Table 4) (style: $\chi^2(1) = 7.05$, $p < .01$; sound: $\chi^2(1) = 4.67$, $p < .05$). It is also noteworthy that children offered more comments about information being missing from adults' presentations, although the difference was not significant. It seems that children more often attended to the content of messages from adults than from children.

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Children's Detection Scores

Speaker Group	Intention of Speaker			
	Honest		Deceptive	
	Gender of Child			
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Adult Speakers				
Adult 1				
M	0.43	1.86	3.00	2.28
SD	0.53	1.95	1.63	1.38
Adult 2				
M	1.71	2.14	2.14	2.28
SD	1.70	1.95	1.95	2.14
Child Speakers				
Child 1				
M	0.57	0.86	1.43	1.57
SD	0.79	1.22	1.81	1.90
Child 2				
M	0.43	1.86	3.00	1.71
SD	0.53	1.57	1.63	1.38

Table 2
Frequencies of Children Detecting at Least One Inconsistency

Speaker Group	Intention of Speaker			
	Honest		Deceptive	
	Gender of Child			
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Adult Speakers				
Detect None	7	4	2	3
Detect at Least One	7	10	12	11
Child Speakers				
Detect None	8	6	4	5
Detect at Least One	6	8	10	9

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations of Children's Negative Evaluations of Essays

Speaker Group	Intention of Speaker: Honest, Gender of Child: Boys	Honest, Girls	Deceptive, Boys	Deceptive, Girls
Control Essays				
Adult Speakers				
M	0.71	0.36	1.50	0.93
SD	0.91	0.63	1.56	0.83
Child Speakers				
M	1.14	1.00	1.57	1.21
SD	1.56	1.18	1.34	1.05
Experimental Essays				
Adult Speakers				
M	1.86	2.28	3.78	3.28
SD	1.96	2.13	1.62	1.98
Child Speakers				
M	1.64	2.64	3.57	2.57
SD	1.60	1.69	1.55	1.83

Table 4
Frequencies of Children Who Mentioned Each Type of Critical Comment at Least Once

Type of Criticism	Intention of Speaker: Honest	Intention of Speaker: Deceptive	Age of Speaker: Adult	Age of Speaker: Child
Truth	21	42	31	32
Missing Information	6	8	10	4
Interest	2	1	1	2
Sound	10	6	4	12
Style of Presentation	7	6	2	11
Comprehensibility	6	8	4	10
No Reason	1	5	3	3
Other	3	3	1	5

DISCUSSION

The clearest finding of the study was that children reported more inconsistencies with speakers portrayed as deceptive than with speakers portrayed as honest. This finding serves to challenge the implicit assumption of the comprehension-monitoring research paradigm that children are always motivated to detect and verbalize message violations (Stein & Trabasso, 1982). Children in this study were incited to detect and report contradictions when they expected that the speaker was trying to deceive them. Presumably, knowledge that the speaker held an ulterior motive led them to scrutinize messages for problems, to treat confusing statements as real infractions, and to report the violations without hesitation. An important task for future research is to clarify the phase of evaluative processing during which perceptions of speakers' intentions have their effects.

In addition to the speaker intention effect, there was some evidence of a speaker-age effect. Children tended to report more inconsistencies with adult speakers than with child speakers, although the difference was only marginally significant. This finding provides a partial replication of McDevitt's (1986) finding of a speaker-age effect in the same direction. It would be worthwhile to determine why children tend to report more of the inconsistency violation with adult speakers.

Speaker age did not interact with perceived speaker intention in its effects on children's reports of inconsistencies. Therefore, Russell's (1984) finding that children combine inferences about speaker intentions and age did not generalize to the comprehension-monitoring task used in this investigation.

The interaction between child gender and speaker intention is difficult to interpret. With speakers they perceived as honest, boys reported fewer violations than did girls. However, with deceptive speakers, boys outperformed girls slightly. It may be that boys were simply disengaged from the task in the "honest" condition, but motivated and attentive during the "deceptive" condition. Other research findings suggest that boys' comprehension suffers more than that of girls from disinterest in the topic (Baldwin, Peleg-Bruckner, & McClintock, 1985). In any case, all the speakers were female, as was the interviewer, and we do not know how boys and girls would have responded with males.

In conclusion, the social variables employed in this study, speaker intention and speaker age, were both shown to exert an influence on children's comprehension-monitoring performance. Consequently, we need to acknowledge the effects of such variables when formulating models of their comprehension-monitoring performance.

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